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South Korea: The Management of Nuclear Programs

This is the third in a series of articles that define the structure and operations of the South Korean nuclear bureaucracy.

The management of South Korea's nuclear programs has entailed three distinct, if somewhat idealized, patterns of decisionmaking. The first--not in current use--was essentially a one-man show run by President Pak Chong-hui who authorized and guided the now suspended effort to develop a nuclear weapons capability. It was notably weak in soliciting and weighing the views of competing institutional interests. In the second case, a senior Blue House official is attempting to integrate program priorities for the research institutes, whose weapons-related work was canceled, into the broader strategic planning process. The third pattern of management--applied to the commercial power reactor program--approximates the successful economic planning process.

Pattern I: The Weapons Program

The authorization by Pak of a nuclear weapons development effort in the mid-1970s is probably the best example of a major decision made, and an important program overseen, by one man in South Korea. Pak apparently considered this program too sensitive to assign oversight of it to anyone else, even a member of his Blue House staff.

Even so, the activities of the Agency for Defense Development, which worked on the most sensitive of the related projects, a weapons design effort, between mid-1974 and late 1976, were by no means a secret shared solely by Pak and that agency. A broad spectrum of Korea's top leadership, including selected press members

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and business leaders, was informed of the project's initiation and remained generally aware of its progress. Despite this knowledge, however, no provision was made--or organizational format established--to systematically weigh institutional interests or individual views on the wisdom of proceeding toward proliferation.

It is not surprising under these circumstances that the management of the weapons program showed serious deficiencies. The political and economic ramifications of the development effort were inadequately considered, and no technically competent official at the national decisionmaking level was in a position to question the feasibility of the project or monitor its progress.

Funds for the Agency for Defense Development's weapon design project apparently came directly from the Blue House, bypassing normal allocation and oversight procedures. Funds from the national budget were allocated to both the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute, which attempted unsuccessfully to purchase an NRX heavy water research reactor from Canada and a reprocessing facility from France, and the Korea Nuclear Fuel Development Corporation, which proposed to indigenously design and operate an NRX. These substantial allocations, however, were also apparently authorized by Pak. As such, institutional oversight was still lacking as normal cabinet procedures for monitoring the use of the funds did not apply.

Pattern II: Guiding the Research Institutes

When the weapons development effort was canceled in late 1976, basic responsibility for guiding Korea's nuclear research programs passed to Blue House Secretary O Won-chol. O, the Second Senior Secretary for Economic Affairs, oversees those industrial and scientific research activities related to both nuclear affairs and domestic arms production.

This phase of management is transitional; it displays elements of both the solo performance of President Pak vis-a-vis the weapons program and the coordinated planning associated with the power reactor program.

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O, who criticized the weapons design effort and Korean reprocessing ambitions as programs that would alienate Seoul's foreign supporters, has placed top priority on directing the research institutes into work deemed acceptable by the international community. He has sought to gradually transfer planning responsibility for nuclear research work to a cabinet forum, thereby removing it from the domain of decisions made unilaterally by the institutes themselves.

To get a better grip on the institutes, O is emphasizing the use of cabinet-level budget planning for individual research programs. Funding earlier authorized by Pak is undergoing review and in some cases is being cut back. The economic ministers in the cabinet, for example, have been called in to rule on the use of already-budgeted funds that the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute has put aside for technical assistance from the Belgians.

Still, this sort of review has so far been a piecemeal process and has not yet reached the stage of planning to determine the general direction of nuclear research. This more important planning function seems to rest with O Won-chol. As in the case of President Pak's guidance of the weapons program, this one-man oversight of the institutes has proven faulty. O lacks the time to monitor nuclear research activities regularly and has found--when he turns his full attention to the problem--that some unauthorized work is being undertaken.

Pattern III: Power Reactor Program

Planning for the commercial power reactor program is handled essentially like planning for Korea's overall economic development--all concerned institutions are given the opportunity to voice their interests. Funds flow through normal budgeting channels which are managed by the Economic Planning Board. Individual ministries, in turn, apparently have adequate control over funds used by their affiliated research institutes and state corporations.

Only in managing this nuclear program does South Korea have established mechanisms at a cabinet level to

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ensure coordinated policymaking and oversight. The standing Electricity Development Coordination Committee, chaired by the Economic Planning Board, determines the role of nuclear power in overall energy needs. A more narrowly focused body--the Select Project Review Committee for Kori 3 and 4--has been set up under the chairmanship of the Economic Planning Board to consider bids for construction of Korea's fourth and fifth power reactors. The Korea Development Institute, the nation's leading think tank, is providing general review of planning and management procedures, while business and academic interests are contributing through participation in a consultative committee on energy resources.

As a result of this coordinated planning approach, the power reactor program--in sharp contrast to the suspended weapons program--benefits from a leadership consensus on the role nuclear power can play in Korea's long-range economic development. Early decisions in this consensus-building process set out the percentage of electricity to be supplied by nuclear power. More recently, policymakers in Seoul have focused on mobilizing official and private interests to assure a steady supply of uranium for the reactor program and to use the development of nuclear power to advance Korea's overall technological sophistication.

Although the discussion in this area is still tentative, over the next several years the Korean cabinet may also decide how to use the uranium ore it hopes to obtain and what degree of independence Seoul wants to achieve in supplying fuel for its power reactors. These would be sensitive decisions that could engage Korea in either uranium enrichment or fuel reprocessing activities. Once made, such decisions would put the job of ordering the priorities of the research institutes increasingly in the hands of the cabinet as part of a coordinated planning process.

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